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ABSTPACT

There are three general characteristics of a small group that merit analysis and application to a forensics squad: oral interaction, identification of a collectivity, and potential for unified action. Cohesive groups have a high energy level that is typically focused upon facilitation of productive group functioning. In order to develop and maintain group cohesion, a director of forensics should realize that he or she is promoting the development of explicit or implicit productive group norms. Explicit norms include task oriented and relationship oriented goals and allowing time for squad members to get to know each other. Because implicit norms develop over time, they can only be encouraged, not imposed, by the forensics director through the use of positive feedback cycles to support group norms and negative feedback cycles for behaviors that violate group norms. A coach should do three things to promote cohesion in a forensics squad: (1) practice active gatekeeping by seeking the opinions and ideas of all squad members, (2) demonstrate liking of the squad and its individual members, and (3) emphasize the importance of the group's task and the need for unified effort. The strong cohesion that results from these efforts leads to reduced squad turnover, higher productivity, better communication within the group, smoother overall functioning, and greater competitive spirit. (JL)

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"BUT WHY DON'T THEY ACT LIKE A TEAM?" AN APPLICATION OF SMALL GROUP THEORY TO FORENSICS SQUAD RELATIONSHIPS AND FUNCTIONING

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"Why Don't They Act Like a Team?"
An Application of Small Group Theory
To Forensics Squad Relationships and Functioning

A typical forensics squad consists of students who are competitive, often agressive, usually outspoken and frequently less than tactful. A typical director of forensics needs to be not only a coach and administrator, but should be an aware and sensitive interpersonal communicator and group facilitator as well. Although this may sound like rather a large role to fill, such behaviors have been the focus of study for some time in interpersonal and group communication, and are well within the range of possibility for most people. In an attempt to help coaches enhance the probability of harmonious squad functioning, this paper will first demonstrate the feasibility of considering a squad as a small group. A consideration of communication behaviors present in cohesive groups and methods for promoting of cohesion development in forensics squads will follow. Finally, the advantages acruing from the promotion of squad cohesion will be presented.

In order to demonstrate that it is reasonable to

consider a forensics squad as a small group, one must first clearly understand the nature of a small group. Use of the term "small" is itself potentially confusing. However, as one small group scholar explains, "small is at best a metaphor. . . for the essence is not one of number, but of a sense of being able to include all members in one's perception."1 Therefore, to the extent it is possible for squad members to be aware of other students and to label them as "another squad member," one can assume that the team is indeed a small group.

Rather than focus on the traditional guide that a small group consists of more than two people, but less than twenty, let us instead consider the nature of the relationship among individuals comprising a collectivity that is a group. There are three general characteristics of a small group which merit analysis and application to a forensics squad: 1) oral interaction; 2) identification of a collectivity; and 3) potential for unified action.

Oral interaction encompasses more than just conversation among squad members. Although verbal communication plays a part in interaction, the concept "oral interaction" is primarily one of influence. As Shaw explains, a group consists of ". . . two or more persons interacting with one another in such a manner that each influences and is influenced by the other."2 So even teams riding back from a tournament in pointed silence would certainly be engaged in mutual influence because refusals to

interact are communicative in nature.3 A more typical example of mutual influence may be seen in novices' attempts to emulate varsity squad members' behavior. More importantly perhaps, a squad's interaction becomes predictable as the year progresses. Coaches know who is prone to start bickering; who will smooth things over; who is a source of encouragement, etc. As Fisher indicates, a group is ". . . a collection of individuals whose communicative behaviors become interstructured and repetitive in the form of predictable patterns."4 Even though squads may rarely work out decisions as a group, sufficient person-to-person interaction and influence exist for a team to be considered a small group.

Identification of the group as a collectivity which has an existence apart from the individual members is best evidenced by the students' ability to see themselves as: Sea Gulls, Cyclones, Bobcats, Jayhawks, ad infinitum. Because students perceive the existence of the team as a group to which they belong, and an entity which would continue without a given individual's personal membership, a forensics squad is a small group.

Finally, in order to consider a collectivity to be a small group, there must be at least the potential for unified action with all members sharing in the success or failure of the group's endeavor.5 The example of shared fate which comes immediately to mind is sweepstakes. All participant's individual results contribute to the final

team tally, and the overall sweepstakes' rating, so no matter how well or how poorly a participant performed, the team as a whole receives the award. Sweepstakes is an example of a disjunctive task, that is, an endeavor which requires the independent performance of individual group members.6 Forensics squads also engage in conjunctive tasks which require the integrated efforts of all squad members. Examples of conjunctive efforts include creation of the team "climate;" writing a team first affirmative; brainstorming for negative arguments; and group critiques of student performances. All of these activities require the mutual, interfaced efforts of all members and in each case the input and behavior of one student very much affects and is affected by all other students' input and behavior. Whether a team task is conjunctive or disjunctive in nature, at least the potential for unified action exists.

A forensics squad falls within the parameters of "small group" because: squad members interact in such a manner that they influence and are influenced by each other; the squad as a whole has an identity which is both clear to and separate from its individual members; and a squad can engage in unified action. If a forensics team is a small group, then knowledge of how small groups function should lead to an enhanced ability to promote the development of constructive squad norms and desireable team behavior.

The fact that an entity functions as a group is, of course, no gaurantee that it will be successful in its task

accomplishment, or that the group will be one which people feel affiliation with and commitment towards. Cohesion consists of feelings of attraction to the group and its individual members; pride in belonging to the group; and personal commitment to the group. While cohesion alone is no gaurantee of productive group function, lack of cohesion does positively correlate with nonproductivity.7 The interaction of groups with strong cohesion could best be described as close, lively, friendly and supportive.8 Cohesive groups tend to sit together at assemblies, tend to stand or sit 18 inches to two feet apart, and who sits by whom at meetings or in the van on trips would change frequently. Consistent with proxemic indicators of cohesion, squad discussions would tend to often be intense and argumentative, yet charaterized by friendly joking and shared laughter. Similarly, in cohesive groups, members are generous in their offers of help to one another. Cohesive groups are not always harmonious, but a feeling of group support and commitment will underlie disagreements. In short, cohesive groups have a high energy level which is typically focused upon facilitation of productive group functioning.

There are several concrete, practiceable steps a director of forensics can take toward development and maintenance of group cohesion. First and foremost, the coach should realize that she is promoting the development of constructive group norms and extinguishing undesireable

group norms. Group norms consist of those behaviors groups expect of their members and may be either explicit or implicit in nature.9 Explicit norms are formal regulations which have been clearly spelled out either in writing or in specific oral commands, while implicit norms are behaviors groups come to expect and accept over time.

Explicit norms are the easiest for a coach to set and maintain throughout an academic year. Policies for the year and expectations of team members' behavior should be made clear no later than the first squad meeting. Task oriented goals probably come first to mind and would include: evidence quotas, required practice sessions; promptness in trip departures, etc. However, explicit norms should also include relationship oriented goals. The team should be informed for example, that students will listen to and be tolerant of other's suggestions, and that people will pay attention and be sensitive to other squad member's feelings. There is a tendency for the year's first meeting to be totally focused upon squad business. Time should also be allowed for getting to know one another. In particular, returning squad members should be asked to introduce themselves to new students, and after more formal introductions have been made, a more informal social time should follow.10 This may seem overly simplistic, but allowance for social time at the beginning of a group's existence significantly reduces primary tension among group members and allows them to focus upon group development and

to direct their energy toward goal achievement. Explicit norm setting will begin squad cohesion development, but it alone is insufficient to continue cohesion enhancement.

Development of implicit norms which support and extend the explicit norms is necessary if the squad is to become solidly cohesive. Because implicit norms emerge from a group as it develops over time, a director of forensics can not impose them upon a squad as he can with explicit norms. He must encourage the emergence of productive group norms by serving as a role model and through positively reinforcing student behaviors which are consistent with the rules and expectations stated at the beginning of the year. One collection of forensics scholars support this advice when they explain that "the effective director will attempt in every possible way to discourage unfair practices and to set an example in the program by behaving as a professional person."11

Norms, especially implicit norms, develop from group interaction and are maintained through the reinforcement of group member behaviors.12 What a director of forensics should do, then, is simply this: establish positive feedback cycles for those behaviors she wants to continue, and perpetuate negative feedback cycles for those behaviors she finds undesireable. For this advice to be of any practical use, the forensics coach must first understand the nature of feedback cycles. As the term feedback is used here, it is not simply a response or even just a reinforcement of

another person's behavior. Rather, feedback is a pattern of behaviors that have the capacity for becoming predictable and thus characteristic of the relationship between the communicators.

There are two basic types of feedback cycles.13 Positive feedback is deviation amplifying in nature because the new behavior is likely to be repeated. For example, if a debater makes a wisecrack during a squad meeting and to the debater's vast amusement, the coach gets flustered and forgets what he was saying, then a positive feedback cycle has probably been established and the pattern will probably be repeated, perhaps to the extent of becoming an integral part of each meeting. Negative feedback cycles are deviation reducing in nature because the new behavior is unlikely to be repeated. Consider a situation similar to the described postive feelback cycle: an individual events participant points out that he feels disappointed in not being included on the list of students traveling to a given tournament. The coach curtly reminds the squad member that is not as issue at this time and subsequently, the student never again voices his feelings about a decision. This would be considered a negative feedback cycle because the behavior will not be repeated. Similarly, because this serves as vicarious reinforcement of other squad members' behavior, they will not voice feelings, nor are they likely to respond favorably to other member's expressions of emotions.

As the preceding examples demonstrate, a director of

forensics must be careful to establish positive feedback patterns for behaviors supporting group norms, and negative feedback patterns for those behaviors which violate desireable group norms. While this may seem more easily advised than carried out in practice, workable guidelines for promoting beneficial behavior exist in many small group texts and can be condensed into three concrete suggestions for perpetuating cohesion building behavior.15

First, if a director of forensics wants to promote cohesion, then she should practice active gatekeeping. The coach should seek out squad members' opinions and ideas during practice rounds, analysis sessions, squad meetings, etc. This may be accomplished by simply remembering to ask students what they think. It is always necessary to actually listen to and consider the students' contribtuutions, but it is especially important to attend to a reticent person's ideas. When students who rarely state their views voice an opinion, they should be given the director's obvious attention. On the other hand, students who are normally verbose should receive positive reinforcement for soliciting and/or listening to other people's contributions. When and how team members should be commended for their gatekeeping behavior should be left to the director's discretion. Sometimes a quiet personal word immediately after a session may be most appropriate because not only is the student reinforced for the behavior, but she also receives personal attention from the coach which is in

itself gratifying.

Second, a coach should demonstrate liking of the squad and its individual members. This does not mean that he should attempt to become a buddy to the students. Instead, he should make it obvious that he is glad to be the coach and is pleased that these particular students comprise his squad. Such a directive may seem like an impossible task, especially to those directors who are by nature reserved. It is however, possible to convey liking without violating one's personal style because the following suggestions may be carried out as formally or informally as desired. Expressing appreciation of student efforts and recognizing contributions which enhance the team's standing or which further explicit norms is inherent to demonstrating positive regard, yet it can be done in any number of ways. The coach may want to make a formal announcement at a squad meeting, post a notice of appreciation on the team bulletin board, or take the student out for coffee. Regardless of the manner in which appreciation is expressed, it should be done on a regular basis and carried out as soon after the student's actions as possible. Acknowledgement of team members' presence at squad gatherings also conveys liking and is done by simply establishing eye contact, saying hello and/or smiling and nodding at the other person. A coach must remember to keep facial expressions, paralanguage and body position consistent with verbal expressions of positive regard. It is also important to keep in mind that

communication tends to be reciprocal in nature.14 That is, liking would tend to beget liking. The students will tend to convey liking back to the coach, and to fellow squad members, so basically, the coach sets the communicative norm and serves as a role model for other people involved in team activities.

Third, emphasizing the importance of the group's task and the need for unified effort can also strengthen group cohesion. If group members can see the value of the task's outcome and be made to understand how everyone will benefit from the task accomplishment, then it is more likely that all persons will be committed to carrying out activities assigned to them. For example, if a director wants to gain the cooperation of all squad members for practice sessions in which veterans listen to and coach novices, everyone should understand why they are needed and how each will benefit from the activity. It should be clearly spelled out to the team for instance, that the squad as a whole needs to do well at the upcoming tournament because winning sweepstakes would enhance the squad's prestige and subsequently increase the credibility of all students at the district tournament. Furthermore, the experience of coaching would be benficial to the veterans because it gives them a better understanding of what judges look for in rating student performances.

At this point, coaches may be wondering what reason other than having a more pleaseant squad climate exists for

expending a significant amount of effort to promote forensics team cohesion. Realize, however, that the advantages stemming from strong feelings of attraction, commitment and loyalty to the squad are quite compelling.16 Strong cohesion should result in decreased squad turnover. Membership in cohesive groups tends to be stable because a strong motivation exists to stay with the group and members are understandably reluctant to leave a group which they feel loyalty toward. Cohesive groups are more likely to be productive and to not merely follow orders, but to do a good job as well. Because members have strong feelings about belonging to the group and being accepted by the group, more energy can be devoted to assigned tasks. In groups where ties to the group are strong, there is also the likelihood that the communication of members with each other will be open and generally of good quality. People tend to interact more frequently and more honestly with people they like, so to the extent that liking is a group norm, the squad should overall function more smoothly. Cohesion also provides an atmosphere in which people feel free to try new behaviors. If students feel that they can try out new skills or experiment with new behaviors, then the possibility for individual growth and improvement is enhanced . Strongly cohesive groups also are able to exert strong pressure to conform toward deviant group members. This means that rule breaking and violation of team norms will be less likely in a group which has a high level of cohesion. Last, but not

necessarily least, a cohesive group tends to have feelings of dislike for other groups and to be very competitive in their dealings with out-groups. Therefore, a cohesive squad should perform better than a noncohesive team because they value the overall success of their group and desire the defeat of other groups. Subsequently, the cohesive teammates are more likely to help each other and cooperate at tournaments.

Promoting and maintaining squad member behaviors which facilitate the development of team cohesion obviously requires a significant amount of sustained effort. The director of forensics by virtue of the role's status has the power with which to require behaviors fostering group cohesion. If a squad is cohesive, it will be a more pleasant and stimulating environment in which to work. Moreover, the team should perform better overall, and individual squad members should be able to maximize the development of their talents. Cohesion is not something that is just "nice to have." Cohesion is necessary for actualizing the forensics team potential and should be actively promoted by all coaches.

FOOTNOTES

1
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12 Kowitz and Knutson, p. 98.

13 B. Aubrey Fisher, Perspectives on Human Communication, MacMillan:New York, 1978, pp. 284-289.

14 Fisher, 1980, p. 187.

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